

Wisdom as a Resource for Preaching in a Time of War

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While researching a recent book about the pastor as wisdom teacher, I interviewed over fifty pastors from various ethnic, cultural backgrounds around the United States on the topic of their self-understanding as preachers. One of the questions I posed was this: How would you describe your preaching role in one word? “Three-fourths of the white mainline Protestant pastors gave this answer: “I am a pastor, not a prophet.”

I write this in mid-August, 2004, just after the Democratic National Convention in Boston and before the Republican gathering in New York in early September. As I watch the news and read magazine and newspaper articles, I am bombarded from both sides. John Kerry, in his acceptance speech last week vowed that, under his leadership, we would never again go to war, “just because we can.” George Bush, in this week’s stump speeches, repeatedly insisted that we have “turned the corner” in the war on terror because of our definitive action in Iraq.

But I have heard more from conservative country singers and liberal filmmakers about the war lately than I have from pulpits. Those listening to us preach are in the midst of an information bombardment from both sides, and we stand up to preach with the avoidance mentality: “I’m a pastor, not a prophet?”

In the early 1990’s, around the time of the first Gulf War, Clark Williamson and Ronald Allen wrote a book called *The Teaching Minister*. They described mainline Protestant churches as balanced precariously between the dramatic claims of self-realization of the self-help movement and the tendency to oversimplify complex public moral issues of the religious right. More than a decade later, the recovery of the teaching office is more pressing than ever. Our people deserve something better from us than our hiding behind a truncated definition of pastor as therapist. They deserve for us to exercise our teaching office to place difficult social issues like war in biblical, theological context. This involves, not necessarily telling people of faith what to think, but more often equipping them to think about these issues in the context of their faith.

My study of the Bible’s wisdom traditions has convinced me that they provide insights into pertinent themes and rhetorical strategies for preaching in times of war. In what follows, I shall first examine the role of the sage as a model for the task of preaching in time of war. That will be followed by a treatment of wisdom themes that can inform our sermons and, finally, wisdom strategies that can help us shape our sermons.

The Role of the Sage

A common misconception ascribes social challenge to Israel’s prophets and the preservation of the status quo to her sages.¹ It is true that Israel’s prophets pronounced strident, direct judgments on prevailing systems. They targeted “the ruling elite and its dependents... on behalf of the socially and economically disadvantaged.”² The

sages responsible for the Books of Ecclesiastes and Job, though using less direct genres like proverbs, dialogues and reflections, challenged the so-called wisdom of the economic and political elite. They subverted the premise that a wise life leads to good fortune that is thematic to much of the Book of Proverbs. They rightly discerned that this partial truth had become generalized by the wealthy because it gave them permission to ascribe poverty to laziness and folly.³

Wisdom (Hebrew *hokmah*; Greek *sophia*), the substance of the sage's teaching, has several aspects or referents. Wisdom, in the first place, refers to a way of approaching everyday life that looks for patterns of meaning to guide human behavior. Wisdom, in the second place, refers to insights the sages drew from this attentiveness inscribed in the sayings of proverbial wisdom.⁴ Wisdom in the third place requires an upper case "W." For the sages or wise teachers of Israel came to speak of the Wisdom of God, personified in Proverbs as a wise woman. She is a metaphor for an aspect of the character of God. She is a prophetess, calling youth onto the path of life in chapter 1, a master architect with God, delighting in the human race and all of creation in chapter 8 and, in chapter 31, a hardworking homemaker, bringing food, light, and clothing to her household.⁵

To model the role of sage from the pulpit, we need to seek to live and preach guided by all three of wisdom's referents. Our preaching ought to reflect our attentiveness to the human face of social issues. It ought to partake of the insights of the Bible's wisdom traditions, and it ought to submit itself to the Wisdom of God, acknowledging the God is the ultimate source of insights for navigating complex, conflictual situations.

The book of Proverbs was probably collated during the post exilic period in Israel's history. This was a time when the nation's identity had been threatened with destruction and the realities of war were fresh in their minds. The Hebrew sages' goal in this context was to preserve the identity, justice, and stability of the community, its *shalom*. Toward this goal, the sage evokes Yahweh's concern for justice (14:20-22; 14:31). One of the sage's goals was to bring about reconciliation between enemies and encourage them to be incorporated into this *shalom*. The sage exercised a "therapeutic power to mend broken relationships and to repair evidences of alienation and divisiveness in the body politic."⁶

The sage helped form future leaders of the community and reminded current leaders of their obligation to work toward *shalom*. The sages' goal was to instill in the young deference to God's guidance as the giver of wisdom, self-control, and compassion for the less fortunate.⁷ They emphasized that a wise person can eliminate a great deal of evil and chaos from his or her life through the exercise of wise choices. But at the same time they acknowledged the limitations of human wisdom, the unpredictability of life, and the sovereignty of God in what scholars call the "limit proverbs."⁸

The sages' strategy was to strengthen the nation's identity from within. They believed they could shape the young to maintain a strong ethical character even in the midst of a society marred by temptation and corruption. For the sages, character building was a communal process. It could not happen without conversation with others, and the managing of conflict when differing views surfaced. In fact, the expression of conflict and differing views were viewed as crucial to the communal conversation. "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another" (Proverbs 27:17).⁹

In the New Testament, the Prologue to the Gospel of John and passages from Matthew identify Jesus with Wisdom. Jesus is God's gift to humankind, and choosing to follow Jesus (Wisdom) is the beginning of salvation, the alignment of one's life with the will of God. His wisdom is not directed toward forming the character of the young to preserve the stability of the community. Rather, convinced that the community's values have drifted from commitment to *shalom* to a holiness ethic that is superficial and exclusionary, he teaches a countercultural wisdom. He challenges listeners to love their enemies, eschew revenge, rejoice when they are persecuted, and be willing to reject personal security as the goal of life when the gospel demands it. The life that results from following his wise teachings is one dedicated to personal righteousness and communal justice, a life that lasts eternally with God.

The role of the biblical sage suggests a couple of things for contemporary pastors, who, like it or not, are wisdom teachers in the faith community. The biblical role challenges us to step up to the plate and preach about war because of our commitment to the education of the youth of the community. Our duty to the youth of our congregation to give them guidance in thinking theologically about pressing issues is integral to our vocation, not optional. The role of the biblical sage suggests that we need to preach about war to all age groups because difficult subjects, by definition, are not matters we reflect on alone, but in the context of a communal dialogue whose goal was *shalom*.

Wisdom Preaching Themes in Times of War

There is an African American saying that goes like this: "You are always either going into a storm, in the midst of a storm, or coming out of one." That holds true with respect to our nation's involvement in armed conflicts. How can our biblical wisdom traditions help us to set such times in theological, biblical context? Not by giving us a clear-cut answer as to whether or not to go to war. Wisdom offers an ethic of peaceful resolution of conflict, but challenges us to figure out when and even whether there could be exceptions.

There is little said explicitly about war in the Old Testament wisdom literature, but what it does say, in typical sage-like fashion, is meant to prod us to evaluate the current situation and decide for ourselves. "Plans are established by taking advice; wage war by following wise guidance"(Proverbs 20:18). But whose guidance is wise?

"Wise warriors are mightier than strong ones, and those who have knowledge than those who have strength; for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory"(Proverbs 24:5, 6). Again, whose guidance is wise?

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time for war, and a time for peace"(Ecclesiastes 3:1,8b). Yes, but what about now—is this a time for war or peace?

Jesus' actions and his proverbial wisdom militate toward an eschewal of violence as a valid human response to offense and conflict. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52). "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Mt 5:29). "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44). "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake..." (Mt 5:10). At the same time, his radical admonitions have a

proverbial quality. They state his commitment to active peacefulness, but still leave it up to the listeners, like all good proverbs do, to apply the saying to specific situations.

Wisdom's insights are precisely those that are hardest to hear in the gathering momentum of approaching war. At such a time, those in favor of the war would rather hear a narrative text in which God seems to authorize an attack on the Philistines or an apocalyptic text that assures the suffering church of its vindication from its earthly opponents. Those not in favor of the war would like to make a universal, blanket commandment out of "turn the other cheek."

What use does either side have for a genre that, like wisdom, specializes in respect for complexity? Neither side wants to hear that human wisdom is limited and that our sovereign God's wisdom is unlimited. Neither side wants to hear that the wisdom process is a communal event, one that calls for diversity of interpretation and which necessitates group dialogue. Neither side wants to hear that prevailing wisdom is not always so wise and that we need subversive sages in each generation to challenge conventional beliefs.

In my judgment, nothing in the biblical wisdom tradition indicates that it would urge preachers easily to embrace war as a social strategy, whatever their government's policy happens to be. The bulk of the wisdom of Proverbs is about choosing wise behavior with the goal of the *shalom*, the peace with justice, of the community. Many of its sayings come from the context of diplomacy, training young men to assist rulers in avoiding conflicts with other peoples. The importance of wisdom in a ruler is emphasized, but aggression in speech or action is never advocated. Rather, the emphasis is on individual and corporate behaviors that can avoid immoderate, angry behavior and secure the peace of the community. At the same time, Israel's sages, masters of nuance, did not elevate passivity as a generalized response to conflict. They acknowledged that a soft answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1) but is not always the best answer (10:10; 25:12; 28:23). Sometimes fools must be corrected. It seems to me that in situations in which the injustice of the powerful against the powerless threatens the safety and integrity of the community (its *shalom*), the sages would not absolutely rule out the possibility of an aggressive response.

In times of war it is tempting to keep it simple. We are in the right. They are the enemies. Biblical wisdom's themes challenge the preacher to complicate people's worldviews and to question their own perspectives. In a time of war, loved ones are risking, even sacrificing their lives to preserve the freedom that is our nation's legacy to its citizens. The original portrait of the good citizen in America, going back to the late eighteenth century, was someone whose work ethic and goals were directed to the good of the community. A time of war is a good time for a wise preacher to ask the congregation if their lives reflect individualistic, self-serving values or a commitment to communal freedom and justice worth sacrificing for.

In times of war it is all too easy to equate our national agenda with the will of God. The wise preacher ought to follow the lead of biblical wisdom and preach the need for recognizing the limits of our human knowledge and the fact that our sovereign God is not subject to any national agenda. Jesus' wisdom reminds us that our "enemies" in an armed conflict are, at the same time, beloved children of God. Jesus' wisdom about wariness in judging others applies in times of war when we can all too quickly become guilty of the same religious and ethnic prejudice we ascribe to our opponents.

The Goals and Strategies of Wise Sermons in Times of War

Wisdom acknowledges the complexity of situations, and if we would follow its guidance in times of war, our preaching would do the same. A complex issue like war, like all public issues, has three aspects: it is a crisis, it is caused by and in turn leads to chronic social problems, and it is controversial and therefore polarizing.

War is a crisis that demands an immediate response from the community of faith. Loved ones are leaving to go to situations of danger. People here feel less sure of their own safety when going about their daily activities. The incidence of racial profiling often increases, as latent prejudices surface.

War is at the same time a chronic problem for the community, one with multiple, complex causes and effects. These include religious and ethnic differences and prejudices, international enmity toward our country, our past dealings with other nations that have inevitably involved mixed motives and mishandled situations.

Finally, war is a controversial issue: well-meaning Christians are polarized in their views on what action the nation should take both at the outset of the war and as the conflict intensifies.

The purpose of a sermon on a complex controversial contemporary issue is not to convince the congregation that the preacher's view is the Christian view, but to set the issue in the context of the Christian gospel. To do this, a preacher needs to pursue four interrelated goals. They are to educate, implicate, radiate hope, and motivate to action. These take on specific nuances when preaching in a time of war.

In the first place, the preacher needs to educate the congregation about the causes and background of the conflict. This doesn't mean making the sermon a history lecture, but incorporating an educational component into the sermon. Second, the preacher needs to implicate the congregation with regard to the conflict: not to make them feel it is their fault, but to show them it is an issue they need to reflect on in theological, biblical terms. A preacher could helpfully preach about misconceptions regarding the religion of Islam. Another theme from biblical wisdom is that of security. "What is security? Does it mean freedom from danger? While heightened security measures may simultaneously inconvenience us and give us peace of mind, ultimately, where do we derive our sense of security in life?" A theme emphasized by the book of Job is the suffering of the innocent. It doesn't tell us why the innocent suffer, but addresses the question of how we are to relate to God in times of profound suffering. In a time of war, preachers need to challenge their people to think about the connection between war and the suffering of the innocent and how they can bring God's will for peace and justice to bear on the connection.

Third, in addition to educating and implicating, the preacher needs to offer a hopeful word in the context of preaching about war. God's will is peace. The preacher could preach about instances of kindness and self-sacrifice in times of war, bright spots of redemption in the shadowed landscape. In the face of despair that peace will ever come, God still calls us to work for *shalom*.

The fourth goal the wise preacher on war needs to pursue is to motivate people to multiple, constructive responses to the conflict, empowered by the Grace of God.¹⁰ Such responses might, for some, include protesting against the war. Others might focus on efforts to make daily life for our service people more bearable. Others might reach out to the families who have lost loved ones or whose loved ones are in harm's way. Others might seek to make connections with people of other faiths to

build mutual respect and understanding. Others might want to participate in educational opportunities beyond the worship hour in which differing views can be aired and discussed at some length.

When we move from goals to more specific strategies, two features of the sages' role that we have discussed translate into helpful strategies for sermons. They are a respect for differing interpretations as part of the wisdom process and recognition of the limitations of human knowledge.

Israel's sages were convinced that wisdom was a group process that thrived on differences of opinion and mutual respect. Proverbs 26:4, 5 is an example of two proverbs side by side that recommend completely different strategies for dealing with fools. The reader or listener has to decide which strategy is best suited to his or her situation. Thus the wise sermon on a hot topic will honor the views of those on both sides of the issue; it will acknowledge that, on both sides, there are earnest Christians seeking to live in keeping with God's will. The wise sermon on war will close by inviting dialogue and offering concrete opportunities to engage in that dialogue in the educational life of the church.

Israel's wisdom teachers acknowledged the limitations of human knowledge, but this did not stop them from stating definite views on ethical issues. In the wise sermon on war, the preacher, with a humble spirit, needs to tell where he or she is on the issue. The best time to do this is near the end rather than at the very beginning, since those who disagree might cease to listen.

Three specific pedagogical strategies we can borrow from the sages for wise sermons in times of war are the use of concrete examples, humor, and indirection.

Wisdom is down-to-earth, more interested in examples than generalizations. The sages used both positive and negative examples to instill character in the young. Negative examples include that of the gang (1:10-19), the temptress (7:6-27), and the sluggard (24:30-34). Positive models include the woman of worth (31:10-31), the prudent son (5:15-19; 10:1a), and the hardworking ant (6:6-11).¹¹

In keeping with biblical wisdom's penchant for the concrete, it is wise to begin a sermon that deals with a controversial topic like war with a story or example that shows the human side of the issue.

Another pedagogical strategy of the sages was humor. They used humor to help lower students' defenses. The sages of Proverbs talked about the inadvisability of grabbing passing dogs by the ears (Proverbs 26:17). Jesus wonders why we try to take specks out of neighbors' eyes while there are logs in our own. The wisdom tradition uses humor to point up human folly and to lower listeners' defenses, but never to belittle another group of people or to trivialize God's presence and power.

The sages used indirection as a teaching tool. Indirect genres like proverbs, reflections, and dialogue leave it up to listeners to apply their wisdom to their attitudes and behaviors. Following their example, rather than tell people outright what to think and do, we can use indicative statements like proverbs to state cultural views. For example, "Revenge is a dish best served cold," "Don't get mad, get even," or "America, right or wrong." Next to that we could put a wisdom proverb from scriptures like "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you..." (Matthew 5:44), or "a soft answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1), or "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of understanding" (Proverbs 1:7). We could guide listeners in picturing

alternative outcomes that come from allowing differing proverbs to guide us in time of war and challenge them to evaluate the kind of future they want and how their beliefs and actions are contributing to or detracting from it.¹²

The sages responsible for the book of Ecclesiastes used the genre of reflection to convey wisdom. They would describe a situation they had either experienced or observed and offer their reflections on it, leaving the listener/reader to evaluate the experience for himself. The sages responsible for the book of Job used dialogue to embody differing interpretations of innocent suffering, letting the reader respond and evaluate as the conversation developed. Dialogue and reflection, as well as proverbial wisdom sayings, are promising genres to use in preaching in times of war.

In times of war, the sages of scripture stand behind us, offering us a push toward the pulpit! They offer far more than that: sound wisdom on the identity, themes, goals, and pedagogical strategies of those who have been called to the teaching office of the Church.

Notes

1. See Joseph Blekinsopp's *Sage, Priest and Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) for a helpful discussion of Israel's leaders and their interrelationships.
2. *Ibid.*, 147.
3. J. David Pleins, "Poverty in the Social World of the Wise," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37 (1987). See his more recent book *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). With regard to the teachings of Jesus the Sage, see Stephen J. Patterson's, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998). See Patterson's discussion of Jesus' subversion of his society's equation of sin with poverty (80-82).
4. James L. Crenshaw, "The Sage in Proverbs," *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, eds. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 206-208.
5. The poem is best understood, not as a description of the ideal human woman, but a Woman Wisdom herself, securing provisions for her household. Thomas P. McCreesh, O.P., "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31, *Revue Biblique* (1985): 25-46.
6. William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 491.
7. There are several proverbs that ascribe poverty to laziness, but this is not the predominant view in the book of Proverbs. See Alyce M. McKenzie, *Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom for the Pulpit* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 33-34.
8. (16:1,2,9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30-31) Roland Murphy, "Wisdom Theses," in *Wisdom and Knowledge*, ed. J. Armenti (Villanova, Pa.: Villanova University Press, 1976).
9. David Bland, *Formation of Character in the Book of Proverbs*, unpublished manuscript, 14.
10. See Ron Allen's *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) for helpful advice on shaping controversial sermons. Two other books that deal with preaching on hot button issues are Barbara K. Lundblad's *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) and J. Philip Wogaman's *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).
11. Bland, 30.
12. Elsewhere I have called this the "dueling proverbs" sermon form. Alyce M. McKenzie, *Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom for the Pulpit* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 127.